

# Sequence of Tenses

## Rule 1: Past Follows Past

If you have a verb conjugated in the past tense in the main clause or the principal clause, then make sure you conjugate the verb in the subordinate clause also in the past tense. This rule can be further broken down based on the form of past tense that appears in the principal clause.

Tense of the Principal Clause	Tense of the Subordinate Clause	Example
Simple Past	Simple Past	<i>I thought you were at home.</i>
Past Continuous	Simple Past	<i>They were telling us that they loved our performance.</i>
Past Perfect	Simple Past	<i>My parents had left home before I arrived.</i>
Simple Past	Past Perfect	<p>» <i>The teacher wanted to know if the students had completed writing the answers.</i></p> <p>» <i>When I reached the station, the train had already left.</i></p>
Simple Past	Past Perfect Continuous	<i>My brother was angry because he had been waiting for us for over an hour.</i>

## Exceptions to Rule 1

There are two exceptions to Rule 1.

### Exception 1 – Present Follows Past

In some cases, such as one in which the subordinate clause is a general fact, a routine action or a universal truth, the tense has to be present even if the principal clause has a past tense form of the verb.

For example:

Principal Clause	Conjunction	Subordinate Clause
The teacher taught us	that	the sun rises from the east.
The king said	that	all humans are mortal.
He learned from his failure	that	pride has a fall.
The teacher taught us today	that	the Earth revolves around the Sun.
Devi told me	that	she goes by bus every day.

### Exception 2 – Any Tense in the Subordinate Clause

When a comparison is being made using ‘than’, note that there is no particular rule as to which tense should be used.

For examples:

Principal Clause	Conjunction	Subordinate Clause
I would go shopping with you	rather than	sitting at home all day doing nothing.
I will surely miss you	more than	I ever missed anyone else.

## **Rule 2: Any Tense after Present or Future Tense**

If the principal clause has a verb in the present tense or the future tense, the verb in the subordinate clause can take any tense. The tense of the subordinate clause is decided based on the type of information that is being conveyed.

For example:

Principal Clause	Subordinate Clause
He says	he saw an elephant.
My mom will definitely be happy	if you come home.
She thinks that	the food here is good.
Aisha will surely feel that	we are hiding something from her.
They are feeling that	it was not their fault.

## **Rule 3: Present Follows Future**

When using subordinating conjunctions like ‘when’, ‘as soon as’, ‘after’, ‘immediately after’, ‘once’, etc., to form complex sentences and ‘if/unless’ to form conditional sentences, the subordinate clause will not take the future tense when the verb in the principal clause is in the future tense. It is conjugated using the present tense instead.

For examples:

Principal Clause	Conjunction	Subordinate Clause
I will teach you	after	I finish learning.
Aliya will help her mom with the household chores	as soon as	she completes her assignments.
If you do not work hard	now,	you will fail terribly.
I will let my dad know	that	you called when he is back home.
The team will be here immediately	after	they receive your signal.

#### **Ruel 4: Use of Past Tense in Subordinate Clauses**

When phrases like ‘as if’, ‘it is time / it is high time’, ‘what if’, ‘wish that’, etc. are used, make sure you use the past tense form of the verb.

For example:

Principal Clause	Subordinate Clause
I wish	I knew you earlier.
She acted as if	none of this affected her.
It is high time	you consulted a doctor.
What if	you had been given another chance?
It is time	he realised what his habit of smoking was doing to him.

## **Rule 5: Use of Modal Verbs:**

In case a subordinate clause is started off with the conjunction ‘that’ or ‘so that’, you will have to use the modal verb ‘may’ if the verb in the principal clause is in the present tense and ‘might’ if it is in the past tense.

For example:

<b>Principal Clause</b>	<b>Conjunction</b>	<b>Subordinate Clause</b>
We work hard	so that	we may prosper.
Modi is working hard	So that	He may pass the examination
Bablu bhai rode fast	so that	he might not miss his dinner.
He worked hard	that	he might win the tournament.
He was working hard	that	he might win the tournament.
He had worked hard	that	he might win the tournament.
He had been working hard	that	he might win the tournament.